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ABSTRACT

Within the framework of "symbolicity" and "nativistic movement" the paper presents a "reasonably balanced and illustrative" examination of selected negative and positive trends in Native American symbolicity. Symbolicity is defined as the state, condition, and tendency of people to organize their perceptions and experience into symbols and symbol systems, while nativistic movement refers to the process and efforts by which an ethnic group returns to a more glorious time in their prior history and retrieves a symbol for contemporary use. Illustrations of negative trends examined are: (1) shallow symbolism (selection and use of symbols which have lost their realistic sustaining power, such as the Sun Dance); (2) externally imposed stereotypes (overculture has simply stereotyped all tribes); (3) exclusionary use of symbols (use of symbolism to validate claims that "I'm more Indian than you are"); and (4) shifts in meaning of certain symbols (i.e. the warrior image). Illustrations of positive trends provided are: (1) increased awareness of tribal and Indian identity; (2) improved sense of community among Indian people; (3) diminution of either-or syndrome for Indian people (dilemma of choosing Indianness or assimilation into the overculture); and (4) spread of Native American values to the overculture. (ERB)

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SYMBOLICITY AMONG NATIVE AMERICANS

By L. Brooks Hill and Philip Lujan

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By L. Brooks Hill and Philip Lujan*

The study of symbols and symbolic behavior has long been a fascination among students of other cultures. Anthropologists have devoted so much attention to these phenomena that their discipline has often been the home of linguistics in many academic communities. Appropriately, as we borrowed from anthropology and linguistics in our study of intercultural communication, we fully embraced their concerns for the language, metaphors, myths and folklore of the cultures we encountered. Often our work has so resembled the research of ethnographers and other anthropologists that our colleagues needed to remind us of our communication concerns.

Recognizing our fascination with symbols and accepting the colleagial advice, we chose to focus our attention on symbolicity. If your dictionaries are similar to ours, you will likely not find this word. Early in the 1970's, while developing a seminar on intercultural communication, the senior author borrowed this term from Kenneth Burke in order to develop a category system which organized the major dimensions of the human condition around communication concerns.[1] Symbolicity refers to the state, condition, and tendency of people to organize their perceptions and experience into symbols and symbol systems. Unlike symbols and symbolism, symbolicity does not accentuate

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entities or artifacts;[2] unlike symbolic behavior it does not tend to focus exclusively on specific behaviors. Instead, the notion of symbolicity addresses the processes, the tendencies, and the collective actions involved in the production and utilization of symbols. Granted, examination of symbolicity will embrace a consideration of symbols, symbolism, and symbolic behavior, but rather than struggle with new definitions of well used terms, we chose to select a less used, if not a novel term, to capture our emphases.

A second term, central to this paper, is nativistic movement. As explained by anthropologist Ralph Linton, this notion refers to the process and efforts by which an ethnic group returns to a more glorious time in their prior history and retrieves a symbol or symbol cluster for contemporary use.[3] A very predictable phenomenon for suppressed ethnic groups, such nativistic movement has both valuable and dangerous implications. The results of this action can be valuable when they locate viable symbols which help to unify people around realistic goals and objectives. The results can be dangerous when they only provide an illusion of viability and fail to prove constructive on the contemporary scene.[4] Perhaps worst of all is when the retrieved symbols are also readily manipulatable by the overculture in maintaining the suppression of an ethnic minority.[5]

Within the framework of these notions, this paper will examine symbolicity among Native Americans. Although we realize the differences among the several tribes, some definite patterns are surfacing which transcend tribal boundaries. All tribes have shared the American historical experience, and certain broader groupings, such as the Plains cultures, also allow some generalization. At its most abstract level, the perceptions or experiences of any ethnic group, not

part of the dominant society but with a desire to maintain its cultural distinctness, will roughly parallel the Native American experience. We also realize the impossibility of any exhaustive analysis in the present format. Therefore, we will provide a reasonably balanced and illustrative examination of selected negative and positive trends in Native American symbolicity. A concluding section will specify some of the intercultural implications of these primarily intracultural developments.

Negative Symbolicity

What constitutes negative or positive trends in symbolic behavior and patterns will obviously depend on the judgmental criteria employed. We loosely define success for Native Americans or any other American ethnic group to entail, among other rights and opportunities available to all Americans, (1) satisfactory employment for meeting personal and family needs, (2) reasonable freedom to pursue their tribal and social goals, and (3) the opportunity to pursue and confirm their ethnic identity.[6] Accordingly, we argue here, whatever within the domain of symbol use contributes to this success constitutes positive symbolicity and whatever in this domain confounds meeting these criteria constitutes negative symbolicity.

Within the contemporary Native American situation it takes courage for persons sympathetic with their causes to discuss negative trends. Despite the pressure of the dominant society, many Indian individuals are tenaciously loyal to their particular tribal identities. We recognize and respect this commitment. Unfortunately, this emotional attachment often hinders a realistic analysis of their contemporary condition. Like most people, Indians tend to attribute

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causes for their misfortunes to external sources; in other words Indian people tend to seek the causes of their problems in the overculture exclusively, rather than equally assess their own situation and weaknesses. Consideration of the negative aspects of one's own culture, however, is necessary to establish a dialogue which may ultimately result in tempering the negative trends we identify.

To illustrate the negative trends, we will examine four problem areas: (1) shallow symbolism; (2) externally imposed stereotypes; (3) exclusionary use of symbols; and (4) shifts in meaning. Although we are treating these topics separately, they are not mutually exclusive, and the careful reader will soon detect their interdependence.

Shallow Symbolism

This topic refers to the selection and use of symbols which have lost their realistic sustaining power. In some ways past rituals can serve as an ethnic identification, but their sustaining power is often absent. For instance, the Sun Dance contains substantive aspects consistent with a nomadic, Plains hunting culture. In the past, the continued existence of many tribes depended on hunting, particularly buffalo hunting. Therefore, the buffalo was integrally related to the ritual. Although a significant proportion of Indian males still hunt, they do not hunt buffalo and certainly not under the conditions or with the hardware of their ancestors. In other words our lives no longer depend on one of the central themes of Sun Dancing.

Another example, gaining in popularity and practice, is pow-wow war dancing, a Pan-Indian activity in which the majority of participants have costumes variously reflecting tribal origins and current fashion. For many

participants a relationship never existed between these dances and their tribal culture, yet being Indian often must include pow-wow dancing. To particular participants this activity may have some religious significance, and, if so, they may realize that the dance is only part of a much broader concept of their Indianness. Unfortunately, the majority of participants lack this awareness and simply believe that participation will somehow sustain their Indianness. Thus, they are caught in the shallow trappings of Indian identity and deceive themselves about their role in the preservation of their tribal culture.

Being a "symbolic" Indian is small consolation when faced with a myriad of realistic contemporary problems. Although painful, many Indian people would admit that whatever real or abstract benefits derive from such revived rituals, the majority of Indian participants return to a life of material and spiritual poverty. This discussion should not suggest that these rituals should not be saved or accorded respect. However, one must seriously question the emphasis given to them and their viability for addressing serious social concerns, especially among tribes with little or no relation to the dances.

Externally Imposed Stereotypes

With no single image to draw upon, the overculture has often simply stereotyped all tribes. A major contributor to the perpetuation of these stereotypes has been the film industry. Their romanticized versions of the American Indian provide a surrogate identity which, in turn, creates a frustrating dilemma for the individual. On the one hand, Indians have their realistic and often mundane tribal identity. On the other hand, they have the more distinctive image of the romanticized versions. Unfortunately, many

Indian people uncritically accept the stereotype, not only to accomodate expectations of the imposing society but also to enhance their Indianness with less knowledgeable and confused Indian people. In reality, one's tribal affiliation provides a true source of identity, but this may bring the individual into conflict with other tribal identities or create an impression of being something less than a "real" Indian.

Pan-Indianism undoubtedly has provided the major thrust of contemporary Indian expression, particularly in urban settings. In fact, this thrust may well have provided the encouragement to accept the stereotypical images. Unfortunately, the stereotype fostered by Pan-Indianism comes from the Plains Indian cultures. This is not necessarily bad, unless you happen to be a Pueblo, an Eastern Woodland Indian, or a representative of many other possible tribes. The excesses to which the application of the Pan-Indian stereotypes goes are exemplified by the following case which is particularly striking, but not uncommon in lesser form.

A Navajo individual was interviewed for admission to a west coast medical school.[7] Although tentatively admissable under a special minority program, he was informed that an interview was necessary to establish whether he was really an Indian. The Navajo was interviewed by the school's Indian representative who asked questions totally irrelevant to Navajo culture, but consistent with current Pan-Indian criteria for Indianness. Subsequently, the Navajo was informed that he was actually denied admission because he was not Indian enough. Although it makes sense to validate in some reasonable manner a claim to Indianness for special minority considerations, this kind of senseless misapplication of criteria is ridiculous.

Exclusionary Use of Symbols

This negative trend involves the use of certain symbolism, and ironically even the externally imposed symbols, to validate claims that "I'm more Indian than you are." Regretfully, many other Indian people will simply acquiese to this game of one-upmanship and indirectly contribute to its perpetuation. A recurring example is the displaced tribal member who accumulates the collective attributes prescribed by stereotypical images of an Indian. The person thus becomes a curious mosaic of various tribal cultures which the individual hopes will equal Indianness. Unfortunately, in their own mind and in the minds of others similarly situated, this curious accumulation becomes a source of criteria for determining degrees of Indianness. If you display less, then I am more Indian than you.

For example, a particular dance costume with tribal integrity may have a history and meaning consistent with the tribe's culture. One who wears such a costume may well be viewed as less Indian by someone with a fancier, flashier, and conglomerated costume. In fact, others who subscribe to these criteria may likewise consider the anomaly more appropriate. A similar phenomenon occurs on a more sophisticated level within Indian communities themselves. Educational and economic success is often viewed as a compromise or reduction of one's Indianness. Participation in what are perceived as Indian activities is also used as a measure of Indianness.

Shifts in Meaning

Somewhat more subtle, yet permeating the other negative trends, is the shift in meaning of certain symbols. An excellent and perplexing example is the warrior image or symbol cluster. In the past, the warrior was a person

or a way of behaving integrated into total Indian life. It represented a discipline and commitment to live by the ideals of that society. Combat, which did not have as a necessary purpose the death of an enemy, was only one aspect of the total concept. Living a life which the society viewed as exemplary was not easy, since there was little privacy and no anonymity within the tribe. Unfortunately, a popular shift now exaggerates only the combative aspects of being a warrior. Many young Indian males have adopted this recent shift and exhibited impressive courage, especially during the confrontation politics of the 1960's and early 1970's. However, these people have often been rejected later by older Indian people, because their life style did not contain other crucial aspects of the original warrior, such as discipline and willingness to negotiate.

Wounded Knee and the American Indian Movement characterize this phenomenon aptly. Almost nothing of a substantive and permanent nature has come from these confrontations with the overculture, despite their courageous displays. Somehow in the process, no one remembered that a warrior could do more than fight. A warrior was traditionally able to negotiate and compromise in a statesmanlike manner, qualities largely absent from the AIM era.

Positive Symbolicity

Despite the problems associated with the negative trends, we are excited by the promise of the positive symbolicity. After more than a generation when Indian identity was suppressed or belittled, the 1960's and 1970's have entailed a resurgence of pride and devotion to tribal allegiance. To illustrate these more positive trends we will examine (1) the increased awareness of identity,

(2) the improved sense of community, (3) the diminution of an either-or syndrome, and (4) the spread of Native American values to the overculture. Here again the topics are interdependent not only with each other, but with the negative problem areas as well.

Increased Awareness of Identity

Even the most casual observer of the Indian scene must notice the increased awareness of both tribal and Indian identities. For a long time in this country it was not good to be an Indian. Although it is not flattering to Indian people, the resurgence we are now experiencing was probably more the result of the dominant society's policy regarding cultural pluralism, than Indian initiative. Nevertheless, it has occurred, and many Indian people can provide numerous examples of Indians who formerly denied their Indianness, but who are now active participants in tribal activities. For example, many Osage of the Post World War II generation denied their Indianness, but now point with pride to their Indian heritage.[8] This is particularly true of those individuals who are not apparently, or physically identified as, Indian.

Another illustrative pattern is the growing tribal participation in the generation of tribal history and the preservation of tribal artifacts. Included here are the increasing numbers of young people who are learning their tribal language. These developments are particularly noteworthy, because Indian people have formerly relied upon outside sources such as historians and anthropologists for these tasks. Often Indian people have taken particular pleasure in deceiving or misleading outsiders studying their culture. Now they are more concerned with accurately recording their history and describing aspects of their own

culture.[9] This trend allows tribes to correct inaccuracies and to control in a positive manner those subjects it deems appropriate for general knowledge.

Improved Sense of Community

Closely related to the increasing awareness of identity is an improved sense of community among Indian people. This is particularly positive, because formerly many of the most capable people left reservations or communities which lacked opportunities for Indians to gain sophisticated skills and work experience. Although many of these people retained a relationship with their former homes, such identity suffered without continued contact and shared experiences with that community. Now, however, a real opportunity exists to use skills formerly unappreciated or unnecessary in Indian communities. This is partially the result of developing tribal government and federal programs. Although the future of continued federal programs is uncertain, there is still growing opportunity. In reaction to these opportunites, an ever increasing number of retirees are returning to their tribal communities to work. This is particularly true in the case of the Kiowa tribe of Oklahoma.

Similarly, within Indian communities themselves is an increased attendance and participation in tribal events. Although we have discussed some negative elements associated with Indian dancing, that was not a categorical rejection. Instead, dancing can be a positive expression of both individual Indian identity and a sense of shared community. Such events provide a context to do something perceived as uniquely Indian and to foster a broader support group for Indian interests and concerns. Perhaps, ultimately, the growth of tribal events will provide more opportunity for Indian people to deal with matters of greater long term substance. Because the majority of Indian people no longer share a closely

integrated community, temporary and transitory events provide the continuity for a shared sense of community. The value of this experience cannot be overestimated. In a sense it also serves to help recruit and rehabilitate members who are anxious to increase their contact. This participation could begin as a detached observation and ultimately grow to full commitment.

Diminution of an Either-Or Syndrome

Another positive trend is the lessening of what the authors have designated as an either-or syndrome for Indian people. This is more fully developed in other publications, but in summary fashion, this is the dilemma of choosing Indianness or assimilation into the overculture.[10] Like any cultural group under pressure to assimilate, Indian people have reacted with a stricter and more rigid demand for conformity to concepts of Indian identity, however noble or misguided.[11] As a reaction to the more positive reinforcement and acceptance of Indian identity by the overculture and the increased desirability of Indian identification among Indians themselves, we note an increasing liberal trend. This liberality is partially necessitated by the return to the tribal community of sophisticated and successful Indian people. It would be impossible to erase these people's experience and success outside the Indian world; therefore, some accomodation had to be made and is being made. Of course, the growing numbers alone dictate that there must be an increased range of tolerance for the idiosyncratic behaviors among the people. Toleration of these variations is resulting in a gradual reduction of the either-or syndrome.[12]

Spread of Native American Values to Overculture

Perhaps the most difficult positive trend to appraise is the spread of Native American values to the overculture. The recent popularity of Indian

artifacts, such as arts and crafts, has expanded into a broader examination of more abstract elements of Indian culture. Although it is difficult to trace broad social interest in certain phenomena to Indian culture, some of these interests were at least concurrent with the recent popularity of Indian culture. Similarly difficult to document, but nontheless probable, is the apparent increase in a reciprocal exchange between the cultures, rather than the former unilateral imposition of Anglo ideals.

Several examples illustrate spread of values to the dominant culture. Expanded family relationships have provided a model for the dominant society to broaden their concept beyond the traditional nuclear family. Although Alex Haley's Roots has been given credit for this phenomenon, it could not have had the impact without an already receptive environment to which the interest in Native Americans likely contributed. Another shift is from the emphasis on individual competitiveness to more cooperative endeavor. American culture has begun to question seriously the long term benefits of a society which totally commits the member to unrestrained competition. The Native American value of subordinating one's individual ambitions and recognition within the group may have contributed to this awareness.

Obviously, a clear relationship exists between the overculture's ecology movement and the Indian notion of a symbiotic relationship to the environment. However, we must be very careful not to confuse the "glycerine tear" image, used by the famous television commercial to promote anti-littering, with actual Native American practices. Despite the suggestion of the commercial, Native Americans did not develop an ethic about littering, because their communities stand in stark contrast to this assertion. People forget that Native Americans

moved when a campground site was polluted. Indian by-products were fortunately bio-degradable, thus permitting natural resuscitation of the environment. Instead, we are focusing our attention upon the philosophical conception of man's domination of the environment, as in the Biblical reference to man's dominion over earth, versus a conception of working cooperatively with nature. Although we can easily overestimate its impact upon positive Indian imagery, the ecology movement does illustrate one area where the dominant culture is reassessing its own conceptions and behaviors and is substituting a viewpoint identified with a formerly deprecated society or culture.

Conclusions and Implications

Although it may be a painful experience for Indian people, it is necessary to become more sensitive to symbolic illusions and sops. All minority cultures and Indian culture in particular are desparately in need of a second level of sophistication. The first level of sophistication was an attempt to convert a negative image into a more positive one. But in moving away from an all negative image, we have moved past the balance point of good and bad to all positive. This can be equally harmful to long term survival and ironic in the sense that harm will be done by Indian people in the name of their own good. The issue then becomes not one of whether changes will be made, but who will make the decisions concerning those changes. An unsophisticated effort will once again surrender Indian initiative to both the capricious whim of fate and the dominant culture, however well meaning. In any case, all the negative trends taken together do not outweigh the positive trends, despite the tendency to

overemphasize the negative. Still many Indian people are flourishing in a renewed and invigorated sense of identity that is integrated with contemporary conditions and provides fullfilling and rewarding options for life.

Our concern now must shift from describing patterns of symbolicity to asserting their implications for intercultural encounters. Collectively three major problems emerge. First, the conflicts centering around "how Indian are you" have created serious alienation within and between tribes. Many of the older people resent the return of the "drug-store Indians" who are compromising tribal traditions and customs. Whenever these newcomers attempt to become involved in substantive tribal matters, they are often rebuked or ignored which, in turn, alienates them from constructive tribal work. Until these underlying value differences are surfaced and treated, they will perpetuate a shallow interaction and virtual disenfranchisment of a percentage of the tribe. The problems stemming from this alienation are further compounded when we turn to intertribal relations. Fortunately, overriding issues such as energy resources have provided the impetus for the creation of intertribal coalitions such as CERT, the Coalition of Energy Producing Tribes. Unfortunately, such successful groups are too rare. If Indians are to build well on their rediscovered identity and cohesiveness, they must overcome the strife and alienation introduced by the "symbolic" Indians.

Closely aligned with this alienation is the weak decision-making infrastructure of the tribes. For many generations the patronizing relationship with the federal government eroded the capability of the tribes to make decisions. After the Indian Reorganization Act (1934), tribal government was further damaged by the imposition of a benign, but poorly thought out, democratic framework,

emphasizing a one-person one-vote arrangement. This gradually eroded the traditional leadership of the tribes and left a serious vacuum. Now under the Indian Education and Self-Determination Act (1965) they have an opportunity to regain their tribal initiative in self governance. If they cannot resolve the differences between shallow symbolism and substantive issues, they may never develop the capability and course of action to assume self governance and better control of their tribal future. A first and important step is to identify the shallow aspects of tribal behavior and not allow them to confound or corrupt their opportunities.

Overall, the central theme of this paper has been that careful analysis of symbolic tendencies can help Indians move from the shallows of debilitating conflict to more effective and substantive strategies for long term survival. When a tribe suffers a high level of unemployment, widespread poverty, and perplexing infant mortality rates, a pow-wow dance may provide a temporary diversion, but should not become a "red herring" that misleads them to imagine that they are "getting their act together." Now is the time when these events must be directed toward improved participation in tribal government and the collective courses of action which can lead to more realistic success. Now is the time for Indians to parlay their symbolic awareness into constructive results for tribal growth. Until they move from the shallow participation in the trappings of Indianness to the somber depths of reality, they may not capitalize on the fortuitous situation they now have.

ENDNOTES

[1]The five dimensions are physicality, personality, sociality, politicality, and symbolicity. For a brief explanation of each see William Kennan, "Intercultural Communication: An Ethnomethodological Perspective," Phenomenological Research in Rhetoric, Language, and Communication, edited by Stanley Deetz (Carbondale, Illinois: Department of Speech Communication, Southern Illinois University, 1979), p. 144.

[2]See William Kennan and L. Brooks Hill, "Mythmaking as Social Process: Directions for Myth Analysis and Cross Cultural Research," Intercultural Theory and Practice, edited by William Davey (Washington, D. C.: SIETAR, Georgetown University, 1979), pp. 48-54.

[3]See Ralph Linton, "Nativistic Movements," American Anthropologist, XLIV (April-June, 1943), 23. For a further illustration of this phenomenon, also see L. Brooks Hill, "Belgium: A Historical Analysis of a Linguistically Divided Nation," Sociologia Internationalis, XI, no. 2 (1973), 153-168.

[4]For an expansion of this point of view, see Murray Edelman, The Symbolic Uses of Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967) and Politics as Symbolic Action (New York: Academic Press, 1971). As applied to the Native American situation, consider L. Brooks Hill and Philip Lujan, "Cultural Pluralism: Implications from the Native Americans of North America," Journal of Thought, XVI (Winter, 1981), 29-40.

[5]For a consideration of symbolic as well as actual suppressive strategies by the overculture, see L. Brooks Hill and Philip Lujan, "Rhetoric of Self Identity: The Case of the Mississippi Choctaw," Paper presented to the Conference on Rhetoric of the Contemporary South, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 30, 1978, pp. 23-38.

[6]For a discussion of criteria for Native American student success, see Philip Lujan and L. Brooks Hill, "Intercultural Communication as an Academic Haven for Native American Studies," American Indian Issues in Higher Education (Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, UCLA, 1980), pp. 200-204.

[7]Interview by Philip Lujan with Osage student who was personally acquainted with the Navajo applicant, March 3, 1982. The names of these students are kept anonymous at their request.

[8]A study of Osage myth diffusion confirmed this generational gap. See Diana Wondergem, William Kennan, and L. Brooks Hill, "The Osage Little-People Myth: A Communication Perspective," to appear in the International and Inter-Cultural Communication, Vol VI, edited by Nemi Jain (Falls Church, Virginia: Speech Communication Association).

[9]This trend is not yet widespread, as many Native Americans continue to resist research because of past abuses.

[10]See Hill and Lujan, "Cultural Pluralism . . . ," pp. 36-38.

[11]See pages 4-8 above.

[12]For a more detailed discussion of this either-or problem, see Phillip Lujan, William Kennan, L. Brooks Hill, and Larry Long, "Communication Reticence of Native Americans in the Classroom: A Reconceptualization and Approach," Paper presented to SCA convention, San Antonio, Texas, November 12, 1979.